

"Mozart's Symphonies: Context, Performance Practice, Reception." By Neal Zaslaw

Malcolm S. Cole

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Cole, Malcolm S. (1991) ""Mozart's Symphonies: Context, Performance Practice, Reception." By Neal Zaslaw," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 4: No. 2, Article 8. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199104.02.08
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol4/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Neal Zaslaw. *Mozart's Symphonies: Context, Performance Practice, Reception*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. xxv, 617p. ISBN 0-19-315240-1.

How many symphonies did Mozart compose? While the precise total may never be known, Neal Zaslaw's superb study significantly advances our knowledge on several fronts. In this exhaustively researched, clearly organized, and lucidly written volume, the author "attempts to account for every symphony that has ever been associated with the name Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart" (vii).

A striking claim initiates the proceedings: Mozart's symphonies, far from being conceived as art for art's sake, are *Gebrauchsmusik*, "music for use, functional music." Announced in the book's subtitle are the three broad areas of inquiry to be addressed. Program notes, analysis, and biography are secondary to Zaslaw's principal goals: to place each symphony in a musical and cultural context; to examine the role the symphony played in Mozart's creative life and what he in turn may have contributed to the genre; to gather, sift, organize, and evaluate the information about Mozart's symphonies and their context; to reveal what is known about how Mozart's symphonies were performed.

The book contains thirteen evocatively-titled chapters, supplemented by six appendices, thirty-one tables, seventeen plates, three figures, and generous musical examples. Established in Chapter 1, "Salzburg (I): Origins (1756-1764)," is the background: in general, the town's performing resources *ca.* 1756 and its symphonists; specifically, the powerful formative role of father Leopold. The early tours provide the foreground.

With Chapter 2, "The Grand Tour (I): London (1764-1765)," we encounter the Symphony in E flat Major, K. 16, which is introduced by the first of the seventy-nine incipits distributed throughout the book. Accompanying these incipits are the measure totals of each movement and concise information about instrumentation, autograph, principal source, facsimile, and editions. Travels continue in Chapter 3, "The Grand Tour (II): Holland — France — Switzerland — Bavaria (1765-1766)," before a return home and Mozart's symphonic debut there, covered in Chapter 4, "The *Sinfonia da Chiesa*, and Salzburg (1766-1767).

Supported by recently published archival documents, Chapter 5 heralds a new dimension in Mozart's symphonic experience: "Vienna (I); Orchestra Land (1767-1768)." The playing of Viennese orchestras apparently inspired Mozart to produce symphonies of greater length, seriousness, and technical complexity than he had previously attempted. Chapter 6, "Lambach and Salzburg (1769)," illustrates Zaslaw's exemplary investigative approach. After carefully weighing the evidence, he hypothesizes that the "New Lambach Symphony" is by Leopold, the "Old Lambach" by Wolfgang. The account continues in gripping fashion through Chapters 7, "Italy: Fons et Origo (1769-1773)"; 8, "Salzburg (II): Limbo (1770-1777)," a period of symphonic frenzy; 9, "Mannheim and Paris: Frustration (1777-1778)"; 10, "Salzburg (III); Serfdom (1779-1780)"; and 11, "Vienna (II); Independence (1780-1791)." "However much the formation of Mozart's symphonic style owed to the Italian *sinfonia*, to the 'English' symphonies of J.C. Bach and C.F. Abel, to the brilliant orchestral writing of Mannheim composers, and to local Salzburg traditions, it was also indebted to a Viennese (or, perhaps more accurately, Austrian) influence, culminating in the final flowering of symphonic masterpieces" (p. 366). Among the many significant contributions found in this chapter is Zaslaw's proposal of three possible practical goals for the great trilogy: a series of subscription concerts; sale or publication as an opus; a body of symphonies for a proposed visit to London.

Before reviewing Chapters 12 and 13 in some detail, it is fitting to reflect upon the book's numerous merits and its singularly few problems. Guiding the reader through the long, densely-packed chapters is a clear, lively, literate prose style in which felicitous turns of phrase abound. A typesetting error, like that in the first paragraph on p. 417, is a rarity indeed, as is a confusing sentence like that running from p. 527 to p. 528. Effectively designed tables reinforce the text. Of these, Table 10.2 can be amended by Alyson McLamore's recently completed dissertation, "Symphonic Conventions in London's Concert Rooms, ca. 1755-1790" (Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 1991). In a design miscalculation, the prematurely placed incipit of K. 22 interrupts the ongoing discussion of K. 19 (p. 47). Together with the copious, well-translated quotes that bring Mozart's world to vivid life go calls for caution, for example, "there is a lot of evidence that is hard to match with what Mozart says in his letters; his lack of veracity when writing to his father is still not sufficiently taken into account by biographers" (p. 329). Zaslaw proves adept both at iconography — see his multi-layered interpretations of the plates — and at drawing interdisciplinary connections — see his view of the symphony as a "stylized conspectus of the eighteenth century's

favourite artistic subject-matter" (p. 418); the heroic, the amorous, the pastoral, the courtly, the antic, and the rustic or popular.

Constantly placing Mozart and his music in context, Zaslaw displays an enviable grasp of current work in the field, for example, Jan LaRue (activity analysis of K. 17), Alan Tyson (paper types), Rose Rosengard Subotnik (a critical world view in Mozart's last three symphonies), and Leonard Ratner (*ars combinatoria*). At the same time, he demonstrates respect for the work of predecessors like Wyzewa and Saint-Foix, while offering criticism when he deems it warranted (see their "fantasy" concerning the origin of K. 76=42a, p. 103). His own views of issues and personalities are commendably balanced, as in his cautious reaction to the furore surrounding the 1982 discovery of a set of parts for the lost Symphony in A minor, K. Anh. 220=16a. His critical faculty extends to Mozart himself, for instance, a staggered oboe entrance in K. 133/I which "must be considered a rare instance of failed artistic judgement on Mozart's part" (p. 239).

One of Zaslaw's greatest assets is his ability to scrutinize and interpret evidence. Three instances of the many that might be cited are his discussion of Leopold Mozart's 'Report' of 1757 (printed in Appendix C), his evaluation of Wolfgang's celebrated letter of 11 April 1781 concerning a performance of one of his symphonies by a large orchestra, and his analysis of the "Symphony" entry the elderly Charles Burney prepared for a new edition of the *Cyclopaedia* edited by Abraham Rees. Hypotheses, e.g. "that symphonies employing plainsong were not those intended for liturgical use" (p. 83), and speculation, e.g. the dating and attribution of K. 45b (p. 95), are clearly labelled as such. At work also is the faculty of imagination, for instance, the use of publication price as an aid to identifying symphonies (pp. 372-73).

Zaslaw's command of the whole is impressive. So too is his attention to detail. See, for example, his corroboration of a clergyman's report based on Mozart's extreme sensitivity to trumpets in his childhood (pp. 110-11). One might wish to add to Zaslaw's digression about funeral marches by Beethoven and others (p. 443) the slow movement of the Sonata Op. 26 (similarly, on p. 522, are all of the symphony totals reported for later composers correct [Bruckner]?). Spread throughout the text are concise, informative essays on a host of topics, such as "Turkish" music, the Romanza, the Austrian wind-band (*Harmonie*), the slow introduction, and Mozart and counterpoint (in response to Einstein's ecstatic pronouncement of a Bach revelation). To be included in this litany of virtues, finally, are Zaslaw's talents for summary, as in his citation of the

causes behind the numerous complaints directed at Mozart's late music by contemporaries, and innovation, as in his call for replacing today's "horizontal" manner of organizing the music of the past with a "vertical organization, re-creating musical occasions that were characteristic of tastes and preferences of the times and places we study" (p. 525). This is precisely what Zaslaw has done in a well-received 1991 Lincoln Center concert that duplicated a Mozart program of 1783.

To resume the chapter overviews, this project began while Zaslaw served as musicological advisor and writer for the complete Mozart symphony cycle recorded for London: Decca International — Éditions de L'Oiseau-Lyre by the Academy of Ancient Music, Jaap Schröder, concertmaster, and Christopher Hogwood, continuo (1979-83). Not surprisingly, then, his performance practice component is state of the art, a praiseworthy blend of scholarship and practical experience. In addition to devoting Chapter 12 exclusively to the topic, Zaslaw distributes performance information throughout the book as needed, in the form of tables of orchestral forces, details, or more extended discussions. Among the topics stimulatingly treated along the way are the performance practice of a symphony in church, editorial cautions when two versions of a composition are involved, "small" versus "large" Italian orchestras (with their organ-like sonorities and two harpsichords), the Concert spirituel as a performing organization, innovation in the basso part, comparison of recordings, and the French "couplets" construction, "which may be rendered in performances by echoes, or perhaps even by a division of the orchestra into solo and ripieno groups (although no such instructions are found in the score)" (p. 212, concerning K. 110/II = 75b). Individual instruments, notably the horns, receive sensitive, detailed treatment.

Zaslaw prefaces Chapter 12, "Performance Practice," by introducing the terms "neo-classical" ("the approach to performance often taken by 'early music' specialists") and "post-romantic" ("the approach generally offered by internationally famous soloists, orchestras, and opera houses") (p. 445). More significantly, he advocates an "iterative solution" for the topic: "in a problem for which no definitive answer is possible, a series of constantly refined approximations eventually yields a solution that is fully adequate to the task at hand" (p. 446). In short, the author draws us gradually closer to Mozart, his time, his ideas, and the assumptions of composer and contemporaries. He proceeds from the premise that Mozart's symphonies, like his arias, were tailor-made for the specific circumstances of a given occasion. He then investigates certain "nested

spheres of practice, drawing information from a more general level when information from a more specific level is lacking" (p. 450).

Zaslaw first examines orchestral size and balance, questioning the general assertion that orchestras grew steadily in size throughout the period, and noting that post-romantic forces, even when reduced to an appropriate number of players, are not characteristic of eighteenth-century string balance. A study of seating plans reveals shared features: for example, the central location of the concertmaster and the keyboard instrument; division between the first and second violins; placement of the principal melodic parts and weaker instruments forward, the stronger ones to the rear. He then tackles the thorny topic of unnotated parts: bassoons, keyboard continuo, timpani when trumpets are specified. Turning to instruments in general, he addresses the issues of pitch and bows, the most problematic aspect of Mozart's orchestra. A look at venues precedes a probing examination, with recommendations, of interpretive matters such as *messa di voce*, vibrato, articulation, and stressed and unstressed notes. The author's discussion of unnotated ornaments is particularly fascinating. Some modest additions may be appropriate (see his possible solutions for K. 129/II, pp. 483-85). Next, Zaslaw reviews the three factors incorporated in eighteenth-century tempo teachings: fixed tactus; tempo words — in Mozart, Allegro, Andante or Andantino (the most problematic marking), Tempo di menuetto, and Allegro molto; and characteristic movement types, especially minuet and march. From the evidence, Zaslaw recovers two distinct minuet tempos, "both fast compared to modern notions of the dance" (p. 496). The minuet, he concludes, "was neither a dirge nor a manic saturnalia, but a moderately flowing, dignified if cheerful courtly dance, with emphasis and articulation tending to the allegro rather than the adagio style of playing" (p. 497).

The concluding topics of this absorbing chapter are: 1) repeats (they should be taken and should include the da capos of minuets; 2) standards — excellent results can be obtained with minimal rehearsals if the organization has a circumscribed repertoire, fixed personnel, and frequent performances under effective leadership; and (3) leadership and interpretation — the differences between eighteenth-century instruments and their modern counterparts carry profound implications about what a "neo-classical" performance could be ("lively, poignant, acute, clear, refined") and what it cannot have been ("the ongoing shaping, the personal interpretation, that we treasure in performances of romantic and modern orchestral music by great modern conductors," p. 508).

In Chapter 13, "Meanings for Mozart's Symphonies," the many strands are drawn together. Generally, the reception of symphonies was not documented during Mozart's time. Examination of his symphonies from the late 1770s and early 1780s reveals the emergence of essential elements of a new style: dissolution of the composite bass-line into separate cello, double-bass, and bassoon parts; separation of the overture-sinfonia and the concert-sinfonia; a new style of orchestration, especially through the wind writing; and generally a new seriousness and complexity. Toward the end of the century, a shift of emphasis was occurring, as a result of which symphonies ultimately became the main event. In Mozart's life, however, they were still more closely analogous to picture frames than to the pictures themselves. The chapter concludes with a rethinking of Mozart's image, the possible expression of his world view in the last symphonies, and, as noted above, a grand summary of the complaints Mozart's contemporaries voiced about his late music: the elaborate orchestration, chromaticism, contrapuntal intricacy, and profusion of ideas, in short, the very qualities we revere today.

How many symphonies did Mozart compose? Assuredly, the total is less than the number listed in Appendix A, "The Status of 98 Symphonies." Is it the seventy-nine distinguished by incipits (to include the *Masonic Funeral Music*) or, rather, does it lie somewhere between the fifty-two that are definitely attributable and a possible total of sixty-nine? Given the wealth of information Zaslaw presents, an exact answer almost ceases to matter.

Simply stated, *Mozart's Symphonies* is a musicological and literary *tour de force*, required reading for all students of Mozart and of Viennese classicism. Neal Zaslaw, scholar, performer, Professor of Music at Cornell University, and advisor for the 1991-92 Mozart Bicentennial at Lincoln Center, has provided an exemplary *vade mecum*. In it the work of his predecessors and contemporaries is generously acknowledged, new paths are explored, and several directions for future research are suggested: for example, Leopold Mozart's relations with Breitkopf, a thorough investigation of *opere serie* of the 1760s, clarification of the status of every problematic work connected with Mozart, pitch in the Classic Period, and a detailed evolutionary study of each orchestral instrument (comparable to that already done for the transverse flute). Zaslaw has done his part, conscientiously seeking "to remove from the works we study, as well and as accurately as we can, the dirt and oxidation acquired in the passage of time, the moustaches added by the irreverent, and the shiny patina of later tradition added by well-meaning performers" (p. 449). Fittingly, in view both of the quality of his work

and the life circumstances of his subject, the author dedicates this splendid achievement to the memory of his own father.

Malcolm S. Cole